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ABSTRACT

The gulf between published descriptions of curriculum and the actual experience of students reveals lapses in the intentional pursuit of planned outcomes in many colleges. Few institutions follow a clear path in their curricular planning from overall mission through general education goals, to course design, to assessing learning outcomes. Most students experience a set of disparate requirements without evident connections of clear intentions. Many faculty members teach without clear strategies in pedagogy of knowledge of the institutional or departmental goals their courses should address. Systematic outcomes assessment may help institutions clarify goals and organize curriculum and pedagogy more completely. In addition to the problems of goals, curricula, and educational intentionality, there are problems associated with transfer of students between institutions. The Association of American Colleges and Universities is working to address problems of state-level requirements and goal clarification. At present, institutions are urged to make clear the intentions of their own curricula and to assess student outcomes thoroughly in terms of these intentions. (Author/SLD)

# The 'Public Curriculum' of Colleges and Universities and the Experience of Students

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# THE 'PUBLIC CURRICULUM' OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIESAND THE EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS

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**Abstract**

The gulf between published descriptions of curriculum and the actual experience of students reveals lapses in the intentional pursuit of planned outcomes in many colleges. Few institutions follow a clear path in their curricular planning from overall mission through general education goals, to course design, to assessing learning outcomes. Thus most students experience a set of disparate requirements without evident connections or clear intentions. Many faculty members teach without clear strategies in pedagogy or knowledge of what institutional or departmental goals their courses should address. Systematic outcomes assessment may help institutions to clarify goals and organize curriculum and pedagogy more completely. AAC&U is working with regional and specialized accreditors and entire state systems to generate discussion on intentional connections among goals, curricular design, pedagogy, and assessment.

Providing a broad sense of the relationship between the formal curriculum of a college or university and what students actually experience turns out to involve many more kinds of considerations than at first might appear. What do we mean by "curriculum" anyway? Is it only the content of courses or does it also have to do with the way the courses are taught? What is the relationship between content and intellectual skills in defining curriculum? Would one answer the central questions differently for the major than for general education? What are the differences between public institutions, where the state plays a role in defining curriculum, and non-public ones that have no such constraints? What is the difference in the experience of students who complete their entire undergraduate programs at a single institution and those who earn credit at several? What is the role of accrediting associations, both regional and specialized, in defining curriculum?

A "briefing paper" must necessarily deal with these questions through broad generalizations. Though one can reasonably talk about standard practices, there are always outliers. So keep in mind that almost every statement here should include the phrase "exceptions excepted."

**Definitions**

Let us assume that by "curriculum" we mean a purposeful structure of academic courses that students must complete in order to fulfill the graduation requirements of an individual college or university. In most cases, this structure will include a group of general education courses and a major area of concentration. These two sets of courses are conceived separately, though there may be some overlap between them. At the majority of institutions the general education segment will be made up of a small number of specifically required courses (e.g., English composition, a freshman seminar) and certain area requirements (e.g., mathematics, humanities) which may be satisfied by selecting from a list of courses. The courses included in these area requirements may be identified by their subject matter (arts, social sciences, cross-cultural perspectives) or by the particular intellectual skills (e.g., writing, critical thinking) that are emphasized, or both. More recent innovations in general education have produced multidisciplinary courses that are sequential or foundational in nature.

**Goals, Curricula, and Educational Intentionality**

Presumably the requirements of the general education program have a clear relationship to the educational goals of the institution. In practice, however, those goals are so broadly stated that almost any structure of the curriculum can be rationalized to reflect them. Thus the institution's formal mission and goals provide very little guidance to curriculum designers. The design of majors is largely influenced by what is normative in the field of study. For occupational and professional majors, the normative curriculum is heavily influenced by the standards imposed by the accrediting body for that field. Significant variation among institutions is more likely to be in matters of teaching strategies than in the content of the curriculum. In arts and sciences disciplines, the curriculum is largely determined by contemporary consensus about what constitutes "the field."

In neither case, however, is the curriculum in the major likely to be much influenced by institutional goals other than the goal of every student's studying some subject "in depth." Sometimes–but not often enough–the major program is asked specifically to take on some of the general goals of the institution, such as improving communication skills or enhancing students' analytic thinking abilities. For the most part, however, the goals of the major program are determined by the academic unit and defined with widely varying degrees of specificity. Many units that do not have to prepare their students for professional licensure are reluctant to define expected outcomes of the major. Thus the major becomes defined by the content of the courses rather than by the ends to be achieved by engaging that content. Even some professional accrediting associations are remiss in stating the intent of the curriculum elements they specify.

This lack of clear intentionality is far more of a problem for general education than it is for most majors. At surprisingly few institutions can one follow a clear path from institutional mission statement to a statement of goals for the general

education program to curricular design to the specification of the purposes of particular general education requirements and courses. Indeed, at many institutions one is hard-pressed to find written materials that will effectively answer the perennial student question, "Why do I have to take this course?" Because faculty members and academic advisors are either not informed about the rationale for the general education program and have not thought much about it or because no convincing rationale exists, they are unable to provide the students with convincing answers.

In other words, to respond directly to the question that occasions this paper, the great majority of undergraduates experience the general education program–and sometimes the major as well–as a set of discrete course requirements to be met rather than as a structure of academic experiences that together constitute a competent collegiate education as defined by the institution. For the majority of undergraduate students, the "public curriculum" is a set of requirements rather than an integrated structure with clear intentions. This lack of clear intentionality for the curriculum has a number of unfortunate consequences:

- Faculty members have little guidance about the ends to which they should be teaching courses that satisfy particular requirements. Thus the courses are often not clearly related to any purpose outside themselves.
- Faculty members have no clear guidance about the pedagogical strategies they can most usefully adopt to meet the purposes of their courses. Curriculum is not solely a matter of subject matter content but is also a function of teaching style and methods.
- Academic advisors concentrate their efforts on the mechanical business of making sure that students take the right courses to meet the stated requirements. A clearly rationalized curriculum would allow them to spend advising time helping students plan a coherent program of courses that consciously build a full repertoire of the skills and awarenesses that characterize collegiate education.
- Lacking a clear conception of the goals of the curriculum, institutions have difficulty in assessing the effectiveness of their instructional programs.

These widespread problems are slowly being reduced by several of the regional accrediting associations, which are pressing their members to assess the general learning outcomes for students of the education they provide. The pressure toward systematic outcomes assessment forces colleges and universities to specify their goals more carefully and to organize both curriculum and pedagogy to meet those goals. Thus assessment makes everyone more conscious of goals and more intentional in achieving them. When everyone at an institution reaches this state of awareness, the public curriculum and the student experience of it will become more congruent. This congruence is one of the primary characteristics AAC&U is seeking as it identifies leadership institutions for "Greater Expectations."

**Problems Associated with Transfer**

The foregoing discussion, as it relates to students, takes as a normative model students who attend the same institution for nearly all of their undergraduate

years and thus follow a single curricular structure. In fact, however, attendance at a single institution is not the norm for graduates of public colleges and universities, where the majority of those earning bachelor's degrees started their collegiate education at another institution. In their desire to ease student transfer, the great majority of public and many private institutions make various accommodations for transfer of credit (credit earned by completing an individual course). As an upshot, students who receive bachelor's degrees from a given institution may have had a general education experience very different from students who have completed their entire undergraduate programs at that institution. The meaning of that institution's degree, as defined by its curriculum, holds for only some of its degree recipients. At many public institutions this is a minority of graduates.

For many students who move among institutions within a state public university system–community college transfers to four-year institutions, for example–the only common thread of general education is provided by statewide requirements. These requirements are typically minimal and quite general, most commonly taking the form of a one- or two-semester writing requirement, a one-semester mathematics requirement, and two semesters each in the humanities, social sciences and sciences. In some cases (e.g., New York, Georgia) there is more specific designation of subject matter, but the purposes of studying those subjects–however defined–is seldom stated. This vagueness about curricular purposes at the state level facilitates transfer credit and preserves the curricular autonomy of institutions, but it also trivializes the idea of general education. For example, by statewide regulation in most states, a student who has taken an introduction to literature and an applied philosophy course at institution A must be considered to have fulfilled the general education humanities requirement at institution B. This transfer equivalence holds regardless of whether the intentions of the courses the student took are congruent with the purposes of the general education requirement at the transfer institution from which the student will ultimately receive a degree.

This prevailing practice leads students to see general education as little more than the study of a variety of unrelated subject matters, tells faculty that anything they choose to do in such a course is satisfactory as long as they deal with the announced subject matter, and provides no guidance at all to academic advisors who want to help students make sense of their education. And it lends the weight of the state to an incoherent view of general education. In terms of our discussion here, this kind of public general education "curriculum" is not a curriculum at all since it lacks clear intention. Yet it is the curriculum that a large percentage of undergraduate students experience.

AAC&U is at the beginning of a three-year project to address these problems of state-level requirements through work with the state systems in Georgia, Maryland and Utah. Equal effort will be devoted to generating national discussion of the curricular intentions of state minimum requirements and their relationships to outcomes assessment.

With regard to general education, then, "the public curriculum" exists at both the state and campus level. As the practice grows of completing degree requirements at multiple institutions, as well as through distance learning, the intentions of the individual institutional curriculum–even when they are clear–have increasingly less relationship to the actual experience of students. Thus we are reaching a point at which, for public institutions, the state rather than the individual campus must be the guarantor of the integrity of the degree. However, traditions of campus and individual faculty autonomy, as well as concerns for the awkwardness of large bureaucracies in dealing with individual cases, are strong countervailing forces to developing a clearly intentional "state curriculum."

**The Role of Accreditation**

Peer accreditation, the process used to validate institutional operations, can serve as another external pressure on campuses. As part of Greater Expectations, AAC&U has initiated discussions with regional (institutional) and specialized (professional disciplines) accreditors with the hope of using the process of accreditation to focus institutions on learning goals and their desired relationship to curricular design, to pedagogy, and to assessment. A greater emphasis on the clarification of these educational elements and their linkages to improve learning as a response to required accreditation standards, should also reduce the discrepancies between the public curriculum and student experiences.

**Conclusion**

For the present, perhaps the best solution is to encourage institutions to make clear the intentions of their own curricula and to thoroughly assess student outcomes in terms of those intentions. The staff of Greater Expectations hopes that the examples set by the leadership institutions will help to achieve such results.

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